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Yurchenko's chilled romance led him to re-defect, Sen. Hecht says

By Bill Gertz
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Soviet KGB officer Vitaly Yurchenko was a genuine defector who changed his mind after his lover rejected him, according to Sen. Chic Hecht, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

"When his mistress turned him down, he went into a state of depression and decided he'd go back to his wife," the Nevada Republican said in a recent interview. "Those are the facts."

Mr. Hecht said Mr. Yurchenko's primary motive for defecting in the first place was to join his mistress, the wife of a Soviet diplomat stationed in the Soviet Embassy in Toronto. But, he said, contrary to press speculation, Mr. Yurchenko's lover was not the Soviet woman who committed suicide in Canada around the time Mr. Yurchenko returned to Moscow.

Mr. Hecht defended the CIA's handling of the Yurchenko affair, emphasizing that the interview expressed his personal views.

The agency briefed the Intelligence Committee on the matter last month, according to committee spokesman Dave Holladay.

Mr. Holladay said the CIA's handling of defectors "is going to be an ongoing thing with us."

Sen. Hecht said that Mr. Yurchenko was the most important Soviet bloc defector to return home, but others have done so in the past.

He said the most valuable information obtained from the Soviet KGB officer came during the first two months of CIA debriefings.

"So we did get a lot information from him and we saved the taxpayers a lot of money by letting him go back," he said.

According to Mr. Hecht, Mr. Yurchenko demanded an immediate payment from the CIA of "several hundred thousand dollars" and an



Sen. Chic Hecht

annual income of close to \$50,000. But only a very small payment was ever made, he said.

Mr. Yurchenko, who defected in Rome last August, was described as one of the highest-ranking intelligence officers ever to defect to the West. His defection, heralded at a dramatic Soviet Embassy press conference, sent shock waves through the U.S. intelligence community as officials tried to sort out whether he was a real defector or part of a "disinformation" operation.

Committee members have criticized the CIA's handling of the defector, congressional sources said. And the White House has considered proposals that would give responsibility for handling defectors to the FBI.

But Sen. Hecht said the criticism was unfair.

"The CIA seems to be the whipping boy, but when the facts are out, I think they do a very good job," said Sen. Hecht, a former intelligence officer with close ties to the intelligence community. "When you're dealing with human beings, obviously there are going to be mistakes."

The senator said a CIA psychiatrist had participated in debriefing sessions with Mr. Yurchenko but was unable to help the defector to recover from severe mental depression or to predict his sudden departure.

"The man defected; he had a dream," said Mr. Hecht. "Then his dream was shattered when his mistress decided she loved him as a Soviet and not as a Soviet defector."

Mr. Yurchenko made a surprise appearance in Moscow last month to tell a West German television crew he was "alive and kicking," contrary to a National Public Radio report that he had been executed by a firing squad.

Mr. Yurchenko said he was "working again" at the "foreign ministry," after spending several weeks in a Moscow hospital for "medical treatment."

The KGB official said he was planning to write what he described as the "unbelievable story" of his defection.

A CIA biography of Mr. Yurchenko described him as a "general-designate" of the KGB intelligence service who began his career as a Soviet submarine navigation officer and then became a KGB military counterintelligence officer.

Mr. Yurchenko's career jump led some intelligence experts to question his credentials on the grounds that KGB officials begin their careers in the intelligence service.

According to the CIA biography, "he did everything but run the war in Afghanistan," one former intelligence official said.

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